

# “He’s a total TubeCrush”: Postfeminist Sensibility as Intimate Publics

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## **“He’s a total TubeCrush”: Postfeminist Sensibility as Intimate Publics**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, we analyse the website TubeCrush, where people post and share unsolicited photographs of “guy candy” on the London Underground. We use TubeCrush as a case study to develop Berlant’s intimate publics as lens for examining postfeminist sensibility and masculinity in the liminal space between home/work. The paper responds to notions of reverse sexism and post-sexism used to make sense of women’s apparent objectification of men in digital space, by asking instead where the value of such images lies. We suggest that in TubeCrush, value is directed onto the bodies of particular men, creating a visual economy of postfeminist masculinity of whiteness, physical strength and economic wealth. This celebration of masculine capital is done through humour and the knowing wink, but the outcome is a reaffirmation of urban hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords: postfeminist sensibility, masculinity, intimate publics, gender normativity, TubeCrush

### **Introduction**

In this paper, we consider the website TubeCrush, on which unsolicited photographs of ‘guy candy’ taken on the London Underground (Subway) are posted, often during their commute to or from work. We bring together two previously unconnected bodies of work, that of ‘intimate publics’ and ‘postfeminist sensibility’, to create a framework for thinking through TubeCrush as a site for exploring cultural shifts related to gender power relations, mobile technologies, and the blurring of public/private spheres in late capitalism. Below, we describe TubeCrush before considering media narratives that make sense of TubeCrush through contrasting discourses of ‘reverse sexism’ and ‘post-sexism’. We then offer an alternative analysis by outlining and bringing together concepts from intimate publics and postfeminist sensibility, through which we

read the images and texts in TubeCrush in terms of their representations of masculinity. In so doing, we challenge current orthodoxy by arguing that TubeCrush represents a shoring up of white male privilege.

### *TubeCrush*

TubeCrush emerged as an online space in 2011. It is a multi-platform company that exists across Facebook, Twitter (with around 10,000 likes and followers on each platform) and through its own website (TubeCrush.net). The website defines its *raison d'être* as allowing people to “pay homage to the hommes” by celebrating “guy candy” on the London Underground. Through the use of mobile technology, the TubeCrush user captures an image of men they find attractive. The user then Tweets or emails their image to TubeCrush. For inclusion on TubeCrush, the image must adhere to several guidelines. These guidelines include it being a recognisable London Underground train – marking it clearly as urban and London-centric (images often feature the exact line, e.g. #districtline). The image must not appear on other websites and must be unsolicited – “We won’t use any photo that looks like it’s a setup, so don’t cheekily try and get your friends on here boys and girls.”

Once the image is public, other users can comment and rate a users’ crush. Each image on the site comes with tags, a title that often includes a play on words (e.g. “A suit-able boyfriend” 24<sup>th</sup> July 2015) and short caption, often again with wordplay and double entendre – “Spotted on the District line, quite frankly it should have been the distraction line – with his trousers pulled up to make him more comfortable, our eyes were drawn to his...cute face!” (A couple of suits, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2016). A link is also tweeted onto TubeCrush’s Twitter feed, @TubeCrush. Given the intertextual and hyperlinked capacity of the internet, the hashtag #TubeCrush allows for a wider level of participation, including those that are not London-based or on the tube (e.g. #buscrush and #TubeCrush often appear in the same tweet). Tweets also sometimes appear from those who are photographed without their consent – “Awkward. Some

guy is taking pictures of me on the tube...Mate I can see the reflection behind you [...] I hope I'm your #TubeCrush today" (Twitter comment).

TubeCrush presents itself as a civic service to other TubeCrush users, and to the men who get posted onto the site. These men, according to TubeCrush, are "going about their daily lives often not knowing the joy they bring to their fellow passenger admirers." Claims to public service maintains TubeCrush's place within the realms of decency - rather than the potential ethical issue of unsolicited photographs - and ensures a discourse of heightening the visibility and celebration of attractive masculinity more generally. Such statements should suggest that the aim of TubeCrush is to ensure these men become aware of their own attractiveness ("think of it as underground admiration"), but because of the site's anonymous behaviour and the unsolicited nature of the photo-taking, there's no way for men to know their image has appeared on TubeCrush. However, TubeCrush does claim that men who find themselves on their site are often flattered or enjoy the attention. Certainly, the implication is that they should be able to take a joke, and the captions that come with the images often employ tongue-in-cheek humour, and claims of admiration rather than seeking to embarrass.

But while this cheeky tone remains a dominant theme on TubeCrush, the social commentary it has elicited from journalists is more serious. Press coverage tends to orient towards one of two arguments. The first is that TubeCrush demonstrates a new regime of surveillance and objectification directed at men. In this logic, sexism is something equally experienced by men, if not more so. However, men's experience of sexism is rendered invisible in the context of a highly vocal feminist parlance. For proponents, TubeCrush is thus an example of reverse sexism, since women are allowed to object to objectification, but men are not. For example, the Huffington Post extract below contrasts TubeCrush with a photography project involving images of women eating on the underground (WWEOT):

Is it [WWEOTs] any less creepy than the women who are taking pictures of men (secretly), posting them on the Internet and then RATING those men (publicly) like they

are cattle on <http://TubeCrush.net/?...> Before someone shouts “yes but TubeCrush celebrates men” WWEOT is celebrating women and in a less graphic way than TubeCrush I might add (Gordon 2014, HuffPost Women n.p.)

The second argument hinges on a different equality discourse: that it’s redundant “to argue against female objectification if [we] do the same to men, albeit in a watered-down, complimentary sort of way” (Roberts, Independent 2014). The suggestion here is that we live in post-sexist world, where desire is freely expressed, thus, both men and women should find flattering such unsolicited attraction as that received by men via TubeCrush. Further, being offended lacks of humour. Such arguments echo a longstanding practice of illegitimizing feminist critique with suggestions that feminists are humourless, which was characteristic of lad culture of men’s magazines in 1990s (Gill, 2007). These comments are also heteronormative, assuming the TubeCrush user is female and heterosexual despite many TubeCrush users being gay men.

The two arguments that currently frame TubeCrush: that there’s a heightened-but-invisible sexism, and that there’s a lack of sexism in a post-sexist culture, are contradictory. Yet, these arguments are often presented simultaneously. Drawing on Gill (2009), we argue that articulating contradictory arguments is a characteristic of contemporary gender relations with discursive effects that undermine critical feminist arguments. In her analysis of sex advice in women’s magazines, Gill (2009) showed a pattern of contradictory arguments, such as using the language of empowerment to support women servicing men’s needs at the expense of their own. Gill argued that the discursive effect of this contradictory-ness was a legitimisation of sexism, since sexist discourses could be articulated (meet men’s needs not your own), while sexism was disavowed (being empowered is good, and this is what empowered women do).

In contradictory media coverage of TubeCrush we also see a legitimization of sexist discourse, with neither account allowing the possibility of continued historical unequal gender relations that favour men. Considering contemporary gender relations with an ahistorical lens

ignores the long history of the objectification of the female body. Such ahistoricism is one of the criticisms feminist scholars direct against 'crisis of masculinity' discourse within which we see in the sentiment of both sexism against men and post-sexism arguments that shape wider public discourses surrounding TubeCrush.

The crisis of masculinity discourse emerged in the 1980s, referring to a sense that men were no longer sure what masculinity meant, had fewer opportunities, and were more vulnerable to low self-esteem and body image concerns (Chapman & Rutherford, 1988; Gill, 2003; Nixon 2001; Authors et al, 2000). The crisis of masculinity was associated with deindustrialization, shifting gender relations, a rising male-oriented consumer culture, and the emergence of new masculinities oriented around traditional feminine concerns such as emotion and appearance. These shifts challenged a 'hegemonic' masculinity, defined as being not-female and not-gay and along intersectional classed and raced hierarchies (Connell, 1995).

However, feminist scholars critiqued the crisis of masculinity discourse for masking continued privileges of white, middle class masculinity, where "the turn-of-the-century 'crisis of masculinity' was, in actuality, a crisis of legitimation for hegemonic masculinity. In other words, upper- and middle-class, white, urban heterosexual men were the most threatened... by working-class, ethnic minority, immigrant, and gay men". (Messner, 1992, p.17, emphasis in original). Some have noted that the 'crises' experienced by black (and non-white) working class men are very different to dominant issues within the popular discourse of 'the crisis of masculinity' (see for example hooks, 2004). While others argued that media representations of boys' failure in school, for example, failed to discuss differences along class and ethnic lines, which showed that white, middle class boys continued to do well (Griffin, 2000).

Masculinity in crisis films and TV shows reaffirmed white, middle class masculinity, for example in 'white-collar crisis' films and TV series like *Fight Club* and *Mad Men* (see Clark, 2002; Falkof, 2012; Kimmel 2013). Alternatively, films such as *Taken* endorsed hegemonic masculinity by incorporating its critique, marrying 'new man' attributes such as emotional connection, with hegemonic masculinity characteristics such as strength (Hamad,

2014). As Modleski (1991) suggested, “however much male subjectivity may be ‘in crisis’... we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it” (p.7). Aligning ourselves with Modleski, we use this paper to present an alternative account of TubeCrush to those so far presented. To do so, we bring together two previously separate bodies of work, that of ‘intimate publics’ and ‘postfeminist sensibility’.

### *Intimate publics*

Berlant (2008 p.5) defines an ‘intimate public’ as “operat[ing] when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people’s particular core interests”. In so doing, the intimate public creates an illusion of connection, shared value and emotional experience between groups of consumers. The example that Berlant (2008) uses is women’s culture. She argues that in women’s popular texts, a shared aesthetic, expectations of identification and ‘insider knowledge’ creates a sense of a community between diverse groups of women. This sense of community is produced through affective registers and the articulation of common shared values intertextually occurring across a range of sites, as seen in the late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> century women’s media of ‘chick-lit’ and ‘chick-flicks’ (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008; Modleski, 1990; Negra 2009).

For Berlant (2008), the intimate public created in women’s media orients around sentimental affect associated with love, romance and attraction (a “porous, affective sense of identification” (p.viii), or what Berlant also calls ‘affective knowledge’). But, the community’s attachment to concepts of love or romance is ambivalent. Women’s cultures, for example, are often full of ‘complaint’, for example, chick-lit describes endless botched relationships, heartbreak, and the failures of collaboration between women. The comedic effect of ‘bitchiness’ in chick-flick films like *Mean Girls* and the failures of heterosexual romance in the TV show *Sex and the City* speak to such ambivalence (Arthurs, 2003; Ringrose, 2006; Winch, 2013). Similarly, female exasperation and frustration are central in *Knocked Up*, where a one-night-

stand leaves Alison pregnant and having to cope with Ben's juvenile stoner behaviour (Hamad, 2014). As Berlant (2008) states, "the female complaint *is* a discourse of disappointment" (p.13).

There's thus a paradox in women's media, for the end goal is traditional normative gender roles – meeting 'Mr Right' - despite an acknowledgment that this goal is associated with disappointment and complaint. Just as Gill (2009) noted that sexist narratives are enabled through contradictory arguments, Berlant argues that ambivalence with traditional gender roles is dissipated through articulating both the disappointment of traditional gender roles and presenting traditional gender roles as the solution to this disappointment.

Berlant's (2008) argument concerning the intimate public of women's culture is that "normativity itself" (p.5) is presented as utopic (see also her discussion of 'cruel optimism' (2011)). For Berlant, and others who make similar arguments, a life based on heteronormative conventionality offers the 'promise of happiness' (Ahmed, 2010). This vision of the 'good life' dissipates the anxiety of ambivalence, so that women may desire a 'normal' life and associate it with successful living. The intimate public's call is thus normalcy, so that what women are asked to (collectively) desire ultimately looks much like heteronormative conventional concepts of love, romanticism, and forever-after, even while women's relationship to these notions become ambivalent.

Intimate publics do not just orient desire towards traditional gender roles, but evoke a nostalgic stance towards them, so that one element of the intimate public is feelings of nostalgia. These feelings of nostalgia also work to neutralise women's ambivalence towards traditional roles, and thus the possibilities of these ambivalences moving women towards political action. Instead, Berlant (2008) suggests that the intimate public is "juxtapolitical, flourishing in proximity to the political" (p.3). Although not drawing on the intimate publics, Banet Weiser (2015) offers an example of such juxtaposition in her analysis of commercially funded social campaigns for women's confidence that create an affective community of young women while neutralising the question of why women in late-capitalism have so little confidence.



Berlant's ideas offer fruitful directions for thinking through contemporary gendered relationships and subjectivities. For example, Coleman and Moreno Figueroa's (2010) account of white British girls and mestiza Mexican women conceives beauty as "an aspiration to normalcy that is, simultaneously, optimistic and cruel ... [since] beauty is understood as both specific and imaginary, and as promising and depressing" (p.357). However, Berlant's work on intimate publics has not so far been contextualized within postfeminist sensibility, despite a body of work suggesting the utility of postfeminist sensibility as a framework for understanding contemporary gender relations across a range of contexts (Authors, forthcoming). Arguing for the importance of bringing together intimate publics with postfeminist sensibility, below we outlined key features of postfeminist sensibility, before describing how these frameworks might be brought together to develop analyses of TubeCrush.

#### *Postfeminist sensibility<sup>i</sup>*

Postfeminist sensibility, as developed by Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie, offers a framework for understanding how media interpolate young women as free, while constructing their freedom as produced through individual consumption and work on the body. Gill (e.g. 2007) constructed postfeminist sensibility as a set of emergent features, "a patterned yet contradictory sensibility connected to other dominant ideologies (such as individualism and neoliberalism)" (Gill, 2016, p.621).

As implied above postfeminism also draws on neoliberal rationality to interpolate women as self-regulating, 'entrepreneurial' subjects who work on themselves and construct their life course and politics as psychological and individualised projects enabled through consumption. This expectation to work on the self extends across all aspects of life, including desire, from which new sexual subjectivities emerge, including the sexual entrepreneur/connoisseur: a desiring, agentic knowing sexuality that requires significant work and knowledge (Authors, 2014; Harvey & Gill, 2011). New sexual subjectivities signal a shift

from objectification to subjectification, enabled in part by knowing, tongue-in-cheek humour that acknowledges yet refutes feminist critique of objectification.

For McRobbie (2008) this simultaneous drawing on and refuted of feminism is a key characteristic of postfeminism. A 'double entanglement' with feminism allows a celebration of women's freedom, while tying such freedoms to consumer and lifestyle choices rather than feminist informed political action. This individualist, consumer orientation represents an individual focus that absents political analyses of gender inequalities, including inequalities produced by sexism and male privilege, heteronormativity and classed and raced inequalities that privilege white, middle class, slim, and able bodied heterosexual women (Authors, forthcoming; Authors, 2014). This individualist focus also marries new agentic female sexual subjectivities (in contrast to traditional female passivity) with a desire and nostalgia for traditional gender roles and the normalcy of the good life.

Looking is also central to postfeminist sensibility. For example, McRobbie's (2008) analysis of fashion advertisements suggests a postfeminist induced melancholia produced by an inability to articulate gendered inequalities. Others showed how postfeminism provides the underlying logic behind ambivalent, judgemental looks between women (Authors 2016) and creates the context for young women to feel empowered by uploading self-sexualising representations of themselves online (Dobson, 2015). Much of this work suggests that women's participation in postfeminist visual cultures is rarely considered in the context of inherently sexist culture that privileges (white, middle class) men, but constructed in terms of young women psychological vulnerability such as self-esteem or inherent 'bitchiness' (Winch, 2013).

Research is also developing to consider how postfeminist sensibility shapes new modes of masculinity. Postfeminism is a flexible and adaptable sensibility, providing a sense making through which different masculinities may emerge that knowingly reference feminist critiques of traditional masculinity. These include 'lad-lit' and 'lad-flick' genres which offer a palatable, if unheroic and bumbling, masculinity while simultaneously positioning women as overambitious, ruthless and self-made (Gill, 2014; Negra, 2006); a reassessment and

emotionalising of patriarchal figures of men set in the past, for example in TV series *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* (Clark, 2014); and hybrid new and traditional masculinities such as those who combine strength with emotional connection (Hamad, 2014). In different ways, these figures of postfeminist masculinity evidence the ways masculinity may be recuperated.

However, academic research on masculinity is often infused with postfeminist sensibility, rather than having it as an object of critique. In inclusive masculinity theory, which proposes that a decline in homophobia has created the context for a more tolerant masculinity to emerge dominant, O'Neill (2014) identifies an apolitical postfeminist sensibility that undermines the way sexual politics still structures gender relations. O'Neill (2014) suggests that the existence of pink consumables for men is celebrated in inclusive masculinity theory as though postfeminism had come true – “and it’s not just for girls!” (p.15), constituting a significant disavow of feminist research in masculinity studies. As a result, O'Neill contends, it is “a struggle to identify *any* work within this field that examines postfeminism as a social and cultural context that shapes masculinity formations, relations, and practices” (p.16). To address this gap, below we describe the key interconnections between intimate publics and postfeminist sensibility, which then inform our subsequent intersectional analysis of TubeCrush, not as an example of reverse sexism or post-sexism, but as a consolidation of hegemonic masculinity.

### **TubeCrush as Postfeminist Intimate Publics.**

Both intimate publics and postfeminist sensibility articulate a shifting of politics out of the political realm, and nostalgia for traditional gender relations that undermines the potential for ambivalences and contradictory demands to trigger politically driven action. Bringing these bodies of work together, we argue that intimate publics are part of postfeminist sensibility, as the restructuring of gender relations shapes new public/private spaces of consumption that direct desire to particular objects of value and exchange. In TubeCrush we suggest we have a folding of gender and sexuality – an intimate public created by an ‘attraction to-’, rather than a specific

‘women’s culture’, and an allegiance formed through TubeCrush between the desires of both heterosexual women and gay men.

The act of taking unsuspecting pictures of men on the London Underground could, we would suggest, be understood as a powerful and ‘agentic’ act in a society where men have historically held ownership over women’s bodies, rights and image. On the surface TubeCrush appears to offer a reversal of gender roles, where both heterosexual women and gay men are permitted to ‘own’ their crush through the ‘taking’ of the visual image without seeking consent. However, as with analysis of empowerment in postfeminist sensibility (Authors, 2014; Gill, 2012; Gavey, 2012; Negra, 2009; McRobbie, 2008), power is limited and fleeting when ownership of the image is automatically distributed to others, in a broader, networked intimate public. Agency here is too complicated and partial, limited in the choice of whether to sneak a photograph or not, mapping onto Berlant’s (2008) argument that “[a]gency feels diluted into incremental acts in the capitalist cityspace” (p.240).

TubeCrush also recants any radical potential through nostalgia, which is a core element of both intimate publics and postfeminist sensibility. Although TubeCrush makes extensive use of the contemporary digital sphere in order to operate, there are also reminders in its practice of publically claiming attraction in the ‘I Saw You’ adverts that were common in print-based local newspapers. Indeed, influenced by TubeCrush, the Metro – a free daily newspaper available on public transport in UK cities – has recently launched their own version, The Rush Hour Crush, which more explicitly draws on the forbearers of publically declared attraction. What makes such communication work is not the promise of longevity or lasting romance. Instead, the nostalgia of the ‘I Saw You’ advert is the fantasy and sentimentality of constructs of ‘fleeting moments’, ‘shared looks’ and ‘unrequited attraction’ within the physical pages of location-specific, print-based media. It returns us to a time when attraction was more ‘local’ and mobility more difficult. As such, the nostalgia of TubeCrush is also deeply conservative, idealising the memory of a ‘community spirit’ against the backdrop of globalisation (Hutcheon 1998). In its modern manifestations, however, this sentimentality is brought into line with ‘fast capitalism’

(Illouz 2007), so that the nostalgic, romantic sentiment in TubeCrush happens in a busy, urban environment and in the context of seismic shifts in gender relations that create particular ‘consumer groups’.

TubeCrush’s standpoint is apolitical, but its proximity to the political is in the recent rise and visibility of feminist digital forms of activism (Keller 2012; also see what has been termed the ‘fourth wave’ feminism<sup>ii</sup> (Cochrane 2013)). For example, Tumblr blog Men Who Take Up Too Much Space on the Train has visually documented instances of men sitting with their legs wide apart on public transport, which in turn prompted the popular hashtag #manspreading. The political use of these unsolicited images has led to bans on manspreading on the subways in New York and Seattle, and a public service campaign in New York: Dude... Stop the Spread Please.

In London, unsolicited images of women have prompted feminist activism. In 2014, the Tumblr and Facebook site Women Who Eat on Tubes (WWEOT) caused public outcry when its owner claimed on BBC Radio 4 that unsolicited photographs of women eating in public were ‘high art’, akin to wildlife photography. These derogatory statements attempted to justify the objectification of women, and were the focus of protests in the summer of 2014, when feminist groups came together on the London Underground to host a picnic (see <https://www.facebook.com/events/262141163967489>). However, in TubeCrush we see a nostalgic, apolitical intimate public informed by postfeminist sensibility in which the taking of unsolicited images is constructed as fun: “The premise is simple: ‘See, Snap, Share’. See a crush, discretely snap him with your phone or if you’re brave enough ask him to pose for you!”. A postfeminist ‘double articulation’ of feminism is also evident, for example, in the way reverse sexism arguments circulate around TubeCrush – so that feminism is both brought to account and discredited. Below we develop this conceptual account by considering TubeCrush’s representations of masculinity and the discourses that circulate around it.

### *Masculinities on TubeCrush*

Our engagement with TubeCrush is part of a project that includes Tube-based interviews with users and close readings of the website (British Academy Small Grant, SG162199). In this paper, we pay attention only to the online material. This data collection emerged organically and intermittently over three years (since 2014 at least, see Author, 2014). During this time, our engagement has been a conceptual one. While there was no ridged research design prior to funding, we believe this extended engagement with a website (who's materials only go back as far as 2011) has provided an in-depth understanding of the patterns and content of TubeCrush. Through this engagement, we quickly identified repetition in the images whereby desire was directed onto the bodies of particular men, creating a visual economy of masculinity.

TubeCrush is a visual economy because it engages with a valuing of images through the site's affordances (e.g. rating and commenting on other's crushes). In Skegg's (2014) historical discussion of the word 'value', she suggests two very distinct domains of experience structure our concepts of value (Skeggs 2014). Women's domain was coded as valuing emotion, domesticity and the internal private realm, whereas men's was located in money and finance: "Mr Homo Economicus, the public, rational, masculine, white and bourgeois subject" (Skeggs 2014 p.10). Although these spheres were never wholly separate, more recently these two domains of experience have been moving closer, so that, for example, intimate relationships become imbued with the language of exchange and finance (Gill, 2009; Illouz, 2007), while financial sectors are emotionalised (see for example Gregg's (2011) discussion of the romantic 'break up' between banks in Australia).

In TubeCrush's representations of masculinity, images also hold a particular value in a marketplace of exchange: a value that orients desire to the bodies of particular men. A scroll through the representation of masculinity on TubeCrush show interchangeable these crushes are. Diversity is limited, with non-white men being virtually absent, and when included, often notable for their defining racial features (e.g. "Dapper Dreads", 17<sup>th</sup> March 2016<sup>iii</sup>). This absence of the bodies of non-white men is significant given that London is hailed as a

multicultural city, so that we might expect more diversity. However, whiteness becomes an invisible, normative and normalised signifier (Dyer, 1997).

In terms of objectification, in the sense that body parts are made to stand alone, this occurs through repeated emphasis on the biceps, pecs and chest: “We can’t confirm or deny that this sexy guy is called Cam but we can say look at those big arms and pecs – Ooof. Yum.” (Cam Ooof Large, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2015); “This guy is a knock out, or he certainly could knock you out if he put his muscles into it. Sexy specs and a touch of stubble make him irresistible!” (Poleaxed Position, 15<sup>th</sup> Nov 2014). Successful masculinity becomes eroticized through body parts (e.g. the size of the upper torso) that suggest physical strength.

The groin area and thighs too are repeatedly made a focal point. The relationship between thighs and groin are suggestive of sexual power, or in their visibility are made to stand as part of the ‘service’ of attractive masculinity, for example: “Goodness isn’t this a sight for sore thighs? This sporty hottie may be guilty of #manspreading but at least he is giving us a treat at the same time.” The thighs, like the upper torso, become objects signifying strength, but which bear much closer relationship to men’s sexual capacities through regular commentary that aligns testicles/nuts to nutcracking: “This handsome guy is all about the legs – those thighs could not only crush nuts but also grind peanut butter. His wondering mind is thinking of starting a one man production line for ‘Sunpat’. If you are nuts about his nuts then vote his post up!” (Freephone 0800 rugby thighs, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 20014).

In addition to biceps, pecs, chest, groin and thighs, there’s a regular suggestion that photographed men have large penises, usually with reference to other large body parts or items (e.g. hands, shoes, bags), again implying sexual prowess: “We love a suited guy here at TubeCrush so we couldn’t help but share this sexy guy in his long jacket and big shoes! You know what they say about big shoes!” (Suited (and also booted), 6<sup>th</sup> February 2017). Moreover, the implied penis opens up a space for fantasies of sexual gratification; however, this is typically the imagined sexual gratification of the man in the image. For example, in one image, a man sits with a bottle between his legs: “We love this guys winter look. Blue blazer and dark

brown leather shoes make us want to just eat him up and maybe take a drink from his bottle he's holding in his nether regions!" (It's a bottle between his legs, 4<sup>th</sup> January 2017). Another states: "Ohh yes please can we get our head between those mighty fine thighs and not come up for air!" (Lovely Legged Man, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2016). As with Gill's (2009) analysis where postfeminist sensibility is a contradictory discourse that enables sexism through combining liberation and men's pleasure, TubeCrush's language presents the potentially radical practice of straight women and gay men taking unsolicited photographs as opportunities to provide sexual gratification (particularly oral sex) to the normatively attractive man in the image.

TubeCrush makes masculinity a bodily property in much the same way as femininity is within postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007). The aesthetic idealization of strength in the posts can be tied both to the heightened visibility of masculinity more generally, and to its location within an 'attraction to-' culture. The intersection of heterosexual women's and gay men's desire arguably heightens the emphasis on strength as a key component of postfeminist masculinity, where gay male culture holds up heterosexual male strength as part of its own visual landscape (Duncan, 2007, 2010). In a culture which only very recently was not visible at all, effeminacy is disparaged and what is celebrated are "visible public identities that [have] more in common with traditional images of masculinity" (Duncan 2007 p.334)<sup>iv</sup>. In this way, representations of masculinity on TubeCrush demonstrate the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, tied into notions of strength and phallic power.

In line with postfeminist sensibility, the hegemonic masculinized body is one whose success lies in constant transformation of the self and forms of intensive body-work. The return of the well-muscled man and bodybuilder aesthetics in 1980 cinema was understood by Tasker (1993) as a response to the feminist era of the 1970s. So too in postfeminist sensibility we see an expectancy to turn the body into a project of success evident in the way many of TubeCrush's images make explicit mention of the gym and sport to achieve 'hottie' status. For example: "There is a new gym in town and this guy is the perfect advertisement. Only hot guys can join and you have to be super fit. I guess some of us will just have to stand outside the gym



looking through the window.” (J&J gym is now open, 25<sup>th</sup> April 2012); “If this hot guy doesn’t play rugby we will eat our hat. Is there anything more attractive than a set of muscular pins?” (Thors Thighs, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2015).

Alongside indicators of physical and sexual power, symbolic phallic power in terms of disposable income and wealth are also valued through TubeCrush, in the appearance of ‘the suit’ and ownership of particular commodities: for example, watches and phones. The language surrounding men with suits is so pervasive that TubeCrush often self-referentially refer to suited masculinities: “If you are a fan of TubeCrush you’ll know we like a suited chap and this handsome specimen is no exception...” (Suits You, suits me, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2014). The focus on suited masculinities also positions TubeCrush in its London location, at the centre of finance and business. According to The Global Financial Centres Index (2016), London is the world capital of financial industries, coming ahead of New York, Singapore, Hong Kong and Tokyo. Thus TubeCrush’s focus on suits is also a celebration of financial masculinities (see Authors, forthcoming).

TubeCrush’s focusing of desire onto the suit has particular political and economic implications. Men in banking have long been recognised as symbolizing status and power (McDowell, 1997). However, more recently the finance sector in the UK has come under pressure for flaunting economic inequality, complicity in the 2008 banking crisis, subsequent recession, and, in 2012, a ‘double-dip’ recession that resulted in an ‘era of austerity’. The recent economic downturn has been referred to as the ‘he-cession’ or ‘man-cession’ (Rodino-Colocino 2014), because of higher redundancy and unemployment rates for men, which produced a boom in post-recession representations of the slick city worker in corporate melodrama (Negra and Tasker 2013). However, in contrast to the sometimes critical filmic representations of post-recession masculinity, TubeCrush is more ambivalent, for example: “In the tiniest glimpse we can see this guy is on top of the financial happenings by reading ‘The Financial Times’. We know that times are tough and the markets are unstable but if this handsome guy is up for it we wouldn’t mind double dipping him.” (The big dipper, 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2011). The wordplay on

the financial language of the double dip recession to again signify performing oral sex on financially secure (if not wealthy) masculinities demonstrates the juxtapolitics at the heart of TubeCrush. Where the public heavily critiqued financial masculinities associated with the banking sector (McDowell, 2010), these same masculinities are validated on TubeCrush as desirable.

Alongside the dominance of the suited masculinity, particular commodities represent wealth, particularly the phone and the watch. The captions that accompany consumer items include the iPhone:

This guy is on the tube and in tune with his technology. Notice his iPhone wires go up the inside of his vest top.... He certainly has his legs open wide, perhaps he needs to leave room down there for built in air conditioners coz he's so hot!! (Close to the wire, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2014)

In another image, TubeCrush engages with word play on the introduction of the iWatch to the market. In a post titled "I Watch" (22<sup>nd</sup> May 2015), the caption asks: "Have to (sic) seen this sleek, trendy, sexy looking thing that was unleashed on the general public recently? Yes we agree... And on another note have you seen the Iwatch?" The explicit associations in this caption between spectatorship, attraction and commodity occur, even while the man photographed is not wearing an iWatch. The value of the watch (in the expensive-looking watch that is being worn) is placed as equivalent to the value of desirable masculinity and associated with the cultural and economic value of the branded Apple iWatch.

The mobile phone might seem like an object that is necessarily part of the urban experience of public transport, and indeed many of the images taken on the camera-phone also feature men holding their phones, capturing succinctly the changing nature of transportation, proximity and intimate spaces in contemporary times (see Macdonald & Grieco, 2007). But what is also interesting is that the iPhone is the only branded phone to be explicitly named by

TubeCrush, supporting its associations with particular working practices and intimate lives (Qiu, Gregg & Crawford, 2014). This includes the creation of communities of knowledge on TubeCrush. See for example the word play in the following: “It’s a good job he has an iPhone because we would just love to airdrop ourselves onto his face.” (IWould of Course, 20<sup>th</sup> August 2016). This caption would at first appear to contradict the suggestion above that sexual gratification is imagined only in one direction, and in ways that are male-centric. But here, shared knowledge of the iPhone’s Airdrop function becomes central to TubeCrush’s devaluing of alternative frames of interpretation and celebrating of consumer-oriented and financially secure masculinities.

## **Conclusion**

We read TubeCrush as offering a phallic-oriented visual economy that turns desire towards hegemonic masculinity by combining a celebration of mostly white men who represent traditional masculine values (muscles and money). In bringing together intimate publics with postfeminism we have begun to build a new framework. Through this framework, TubeCrush can be understood as an intimate public in the way that it opens up assumed shared culture that directs desire towards masculinities that are conventionally normative.

Making an intimate public of women and gay men’s desires has radical potential. But this potential is dissipated through its postfeminist nostalgic nod to romance, and a celebration of normative ideals of the masculine body. As such, TubeCrush is a re-establishment of traditional gender roles within the context of postfeminism: it gives the impression of liberally making visible gay men and straight women’s desires, but its visual economy celebrates hegemonic masculinity in the form of money and muscle, while offering a pacifier for the neoliberal worker in an urban, alienating bustle of the big city. In our concluding comments, we want to return to two elements of our discussion above as avenues for future research. These are: first, the invisibility of non-white masculinities and the global movement of white masculinities on TubeCrush; and the politics of its London location, with TubeCrush harnessing

mobile technologies and commuter transportation that permit a blurring of public/private spheres in late capitalism.

In the above discussion we have noted a relative absence of non-white masculinity, in contrast to the multicultural location of the city space that TubeCrush exists within. Intersectional analyses of masculinity have noted an eroticisation of black masculinities, with a Westernised visual culture that plays on colonial discourses of a dangerous and hypersexual masculinity that threatens to ‘contaminate’ with its sexual prowess (Mercer, 1994; Hall, 1997; McClintock, 1995). While black and other ethnic minority men do appear infrequently on TubeCrush, the previous sexualisation of these masculinities is downplayed, while in some instances ethnic minorities are completely absent (e.g. Asian and East Asian masculinities). This is particularly interesting given TubeCrush’s mobilities in broader digital flows.

The role TubeCrush plays in exporting idealised notions of masculine bodily perfection is an area of research that could be usefully expanded on. The recent news that TubeCrush has found a particular audience in China (Eleftheriou-Smith 2015) demonstrates the global reach of local, normative desires, making the image of urban, London-centric and Westernised masculinity desirable elsewhere in the world as colonial export, and maps onto developments around transnational postfeminism (Authors, forthcoming).

Future research is also needed to incorporate the particular geo-spatial and geo-political aspects of TubeCrush that allow for movement and multiples in location, coupled with a very specific geography of the (gendered) space of the Tube carriage. An important contribution, we would suggest, could come from bringing together the gendered analysis of postfeminist intimate publics above with approaches to human geography and accounts of mobilities (e.g. Bissell, 2010). Equally, the way that these mobilities happen in affective economies, with their own ‘workplace intimacies’, needs attention to further contextualise the both the blurring of public and private that TubeCrush affords, as well as the shaping of specific finance-oriented masculinities that we’ve identified above. First person accounts, from the women and men who take photos or men who think they’ve been photographed are also important, particularly in

relation to the affective embodied experiences of taking illicit photographs and men's experiences of technologically mediated objectification and desire.

We are aware that TubeCrush is only one platform. Developing an account of how postfeminism comes to shape masculinity's articulation will need further analysis of the different mediations masculinity, such as in the way our analysis of TubeCrush masculinity, with its muscle and money, differs from the awkward masculinity of lad-lit or representations of strong and paternal fatherhood (Gill 2014; Hamad, 2014). In this paper, we hope to have laid the ground for some of these discussions, demonstrating the utility of bringing together intimate publics with postfeminist sensibility in thinking through contemporary masculinities.

In focusing on one platform, we have however, demonstrated the utility of using TubeCrush as an access point to theorise a range of complex intersections that deserve attention. Thinking through TubeCrush's affective, tonal and discursive ambiguities, we suggest that reading masculinity through the lens of the postfeminist intimate public allows a deep account of the complexity of image sharing practices and a political analysis of the cultural reaffirmation of financial sector and gym-based masculinity. For example, the context of economic inequality and the sexual intimidation that physical strength can ensure is absented. Instead masculinity is celebrated, if with tongue-in-cheek, in a way that marks the middle class, wealthy, mobile and sexually powerful male body as not a political one (as feminists intend it to be), but as one that should be actively desired. TubeCrush, we argue, thus alerts us to the ways gender power is reasserted, and that despite its perceived subversive potential, locates desire back into normalcy.

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<sup>i</sup> We use the term 'postfeminist sensibility' to distinguish it from other ways in which the term 'postfeminism' had been used: to signal an historical shift, epistemological break, and 'backlash' against prior feminist positions (see Gill, 2007 for a fuller discussion). These various accounts of postfeminism made important contributions to thinking about contemporary gender relations, but fail to account for complexity (e.g. in its nonlinear conceptualization of the double entanglement that works through contradiction).

<sup>ii</sup> We are not proposing that postfeminist sensibility and new feminism(s) are synonymous, but instead understand them as having a complex relationship. The aim of this paper is not to address this complexity, other than to identify a resurgent feminism as one of the contexts in which TubeCrush is located. See Barnett-Weiser (2015), Cobb (2015), Benn (2013) and Gill (2016) for different perspectives on fourth wave, popular/celebrity feminism, and their relationship with/against postfeminism.

<sup>iii</sup> In the last year only one image of an obvious black man was uploaded without comment about his race (Dreamy Blue Suit, 19<sup>th</sup> August 2016). We would suggest that the lack of comment on this man's race is related to his show of wealth, symbolized through his suit and watch.

<sup>iv</sup> Gay slang term 'bear', meaning a man who is slightly heavier and hairy, also appears on TubeCrush as a tag – however images within this tag appear more to do with hairiness (e.g. a beard) than with weight.